FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
April 1, 2001

WHAT DO YOU HAVE TO DO TO GET TO HEAVEN?
John M. Buchanan

We are accustomed to finding a catch in every promise, but Jesus' stories of extravagant grace include no catch, no loophole disqualifying us from God's love. Each has at its core an ending too good to be true – or so good it must be true. How different are these stories from my own childhood notions of God: a God who forgives, yes, but reluctantly, after making the penitent squirm ... What blocks forgiveness is not God's reticence – but ours. God's arms are always extended; we are the ones who turn away.

Philip Yancy
What's So Amazing About Grace

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Isaiah 43:1-7
Luke 23:32-33, 39-43

"Then he said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' He replied, 'Truly, I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Luke 23:42-43 (NRSV)

Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.

Anne Lamott, author of *Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith,* says that the two best prayers she knows are" Help me, Help me, Help me," and "Thank you, Thank you, Thank you." She tells about a woman she knows who says for her morning prayer, "Whatever," and then for the evening, "Oh, well."

Lamott's favorite prayers—and she is a very thoughtful Christian, a Presbyterian—are "Help me," and "Thank you."

Pretty basic, and there is a dramatic incident in the Bible that suggests that Anne Lamott has it about right.

The four Gospel accounts report that Jesus of Nazareth did not die alone. On the day of his public execution, there were two others, criminals, crucified with him, one on either side, a detail the accounts include. We don't know anything about them, their names or their crimes. Whoever they were, and whatever they did, the Roman civil authorities had decided that they too deserved to die on that Friday afternoon, just outside Jerusalem.

Luke adds an intriguing anecdote. Public executions historically have been well attended by the morbid or merely curious and also those who enjoyed jeering and taunting the helpless, suffering victim. Jesus particularly—because he had so directly challenged the religious and moral and social status quo—was the target of verbal abuse. Hard to imagine that: the public ridicule on top of the unbelievable physical pain, the humiliation in addition to the helpless dying. One of the criminals, Luke reports, joined in with angry sarcasm: "You're the Messiah—Save yourself and us." But the other criminal, Luke says, rebuked his partner: "We are getting what we deserve—this man has done nothing wrong." In the story, this criminal conveys the irony. The good people, the religious leaders, are crucifying the Son of God. The criminal, an ultimate outcast and outsider, sees the truth and says the truth. And then, a version of Anne Lamott's prayer—"Help me"—"Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom," and the amazing promise that follows—"Today you will be with me in Paradise."

Do you see the reversal of fortunes in this small drama, the radical overturning of conventional religion and morality and theology? It's one of Luke's great gifts—surprising stories that end up with dramatically unexpected conclusions. A woman who turns her household inside out to look for a single coin and when she finds it, acts as if she just won the lottery. A shepherd who leaves ninety-nine to fend for themselves to find a single lost sheep and when he finds it, brings it back rejoicing. A father whose son can't wait for the old man to die, cashes in his inheritance, wastes it all, and comes home utterly lost, poor, humiliated, and the father is so beside himself—not with resentment or righteous indignation but with joy—he runs down the road and throws his arms around the prodigal and welcomes him home.

These are familiar stories—so familiar that I fear we miss how radically upsetting they were and are. Left to our own devices, we wouldn't come up with anything like that, Philip Yancy quips. If we were writing the story, the father would have waited sternly, arms folded, and when the prodigal has prostrated himself and confessed his foolishness, immaturity, disrespect, the father perhaps softens a bit and says something like, "Well, I'm glad you saw the error of your ways. I only hope you learned your lesson." Left to our own devices, someone said, we'd have the father throwing a party for the older son who stayed home, worked hard, the one who deserved it, the one who did the right thing, with the younger prodigal doing the dishes.

The story of the criminal on the cross is Luke's brilliant final example of grace, a love so amazing that most of us have trouble understanding it, believing it, trusting it.

My four-year-old grandson knows what the issue is. Paul Tillich said somewhere that all little children think ontologically—they wonder about fundamental things; they ask "Why?" a lot. The most familiar form of childish ontology comes ordinarily when you're explaining that God made everything, trees, sun, stars, puppies, lambs, and the child takes it all in and asks, brilliantly, "Who made God?"—the usual answer to which is "Let's ask the minister," or if you happen to be the minister, "Let's ask your Sunday school teacher." So Johnny and his father were in the car singing a song—"He's got the whole world in his hands," a basic and profound affirmation if there ever was one—and Johnny asked "What about the bad people, Daddy? Does God have the bad people in his hands?" And his father said, "Yes. God has everyone in his hands, even the bad people." And Johnny thought about that for a while and asked "Why?"—at which point his father changed the subject and returned to the original topic, which I recall, was juice and why there wasn't any in the car.

What about the bad people? What about the criminals, liars, and cheats? What about the villains of history? What about all the people who simply wander away? What about nonbelievers, people who know about the Christian religion and prefer their own or none? Do they get in too? And doesn't it matter how you live—you can live a life of crime and with your last breath say, "Jesus, remember me," and it's enough, you get in? Some want

us to say definitively you only get in if your theology is orthodox, or if you say the right formula.

Basic and profound questions, and the New Testament answer to them all is grace. Presbyterian theologian Cynthia Rigby wrote recently that we resist the notion of "salvation as fire insurance which everyone will find out they owned whether they remembered to purchase it or not." And yet, Professor Rigby goes on, "It is impossible to fathom how a God who cares enough to number every hair on our heads could not, in the end, find a way to save everyone." We simply don't know the answer to the question "Does everybody get in?" What we do know as Christians is that Jesus is the way. She writes, wisely, I believe, "If these others are included in the Kingdom of God . . . it will be through the mediating work of the one who also is the only way, the one who entered into the human condition and redeemed it. Should it surprise us if it turns out that the one who is the only way, truth and the life meets those we might exclude in ways that are beyond our comprehension?" (*Presbyterians Today,* April 2001).

Jesus seems to go out of his way to include those who are excluded by social custom, conventional morality, and theological orthodoxy, and the point is always a grace—an amazing grace that challenges all our operating assumptions, a theology that reveals a God quite unlike the gods of popular religion.

Christianity alone dares to teach that God's love is unconditional.

"Today you will be with me in Paradise" is a shocking reminder, Philip Yancy suggests,

> **that grace does not depend on what we have done for God but rather on what God has done for us. Ask people what they must do to get to heaven and most reply, "Be good." Jesus' stories contradict that answer. All we must do is cry "Help." God welcomes home anyone who will have him and, in fact, has made the first move already. (*What's So Amazing about Grace?* p. 56)**

Doesn't it matter then what you believe or how you live? Of course it does. Not because God is keeping score and handing out pass/fail grades at the end of the day. It matters because of love—love that identifies with us, becomes one with us, comes to us, shows us how to live as the men and women God created us to be, love that dies for us, love that suffers when we reject it or choose not to embrace it.

The great theologian Karl Barth, whose mammoth scholarly output literally changed the face of twentieth-century religious thought, used to go to the jail in Basil, Switzerland, on Sunday mornings, when he was on the university faculty. Barth would lead worship and preach to the prisoners. His sermons are published in a little volume, *Deliverance to the Captives.* They are about grace mostly, God's unconditional love for people who had precious few reminders in their lives that anyone cared about them at all.

Listen to the great theologian speaking to a tiny congregation of criminals:

> **We are saved by grace. That means that we did not deserve to be saved. What we deserve would be quite different. No one can be proud of being saved. Each one can only fold his hands in great lowliness of heart and be thankful like a child. Consequently, we shall never possess salvation as our property. We may only receive it as a gift over and over again with hands outstretched. (p. 39)**

I love a little anecdote Robert Fulghum relates. He was watching from his study window a group of neighborhood children playing hide-and-go-seek. One child burrowed under a pile of leaves below his window and was so thoroughly hidden, his playmates were about to give up on him. Fulghum says he opened his window, stuck his head out and yelled, "Get found, kid" (*All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten,* pp. 56-58)

God comes to us in many ways—seeks us like a woman searching for a lost coin, like a shepherd looking for a lost sheep. The radical foundation of Christianity is a God who waits patiently for our return and then runs down the road to welcome us home. Christianity is about a man dying on a cross who, when a criminal says, "Remember me," responds, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

A little boy, about five years old, had been reprimanded by his mother, unjustly and unfairly, he thought. So he announced that he was no longer going to live with his parents. He was leaving home. He went to his bedroom and took a small case from the shelf, packed some underwear, socks, a shirt, and a favorite toy and headed out the door. For some reason, his mother allowed him to go. It was, of course, a very different time and place. The little boy walked to the home of a chum, knocked on the door and announced to his friend's mother that he had left home and asked if he could move in. The mother said no and gently suggested that he might go to his own home. He tried another house and another and received the same response—not knowing that his mother's love and phone calls were preceding him down the street. Finally—it was dark now—discouraged and lonely, he sat down on the curb. Out of the darkness came his father, who had returned from work and stood looking down at him, and said only, "It's time to come home now, son." And the little boy, now a man, remembers the safety of returning home, his hand in his father's.

That's the word. "Get found." There is one who is looking for you. One who wants to include you, find you, love you and save your life, one who will never stop looking for you, no matter where you are or what you have done or how far you have strayed or how lost you feel.

Remember me, Jesus, when you come into your kingdom.

Help me, help me, help me. Thank you, thank you, thank you.